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American Literature. By Alphonse G. Newcomer, Associate Professor of English in the Leland Stanford Junior University. Chicago: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1902. 8vo. Pp. 364.

Each year brings its new crop of 'handbooks' of American literature—some good, some indifferent, some worthless. Many of these books, like many of the editions of plays, poems, and essays for the 'College Readings' series, seem to be booksellers' makeshifts. During the last few years the efforts of publishers to be the first on the market with editions of the 'required readings' for College entrance examinations has caused them to overlook or neglect many of the qualities which make these or any other books worth the paper they are printed on. They are doubtless in most cases unable or unwilling to pay for good, scholarly work on the part of their editors. They therefore employ cheap and careless editors, and in many instances grind out books that are disgraceful to American scholarship. I have recently had occasion to examine with some care about all the American school and college editions of certain of Macaulay's Essays. In many cases the glaring mistakes due to ignorance, carelessness, lack of broad reading, or immaturity of mind and scholarship are enough to make every American who is interested in thorough training and sound learning blush with shame.

But none of these things are true of the delightful little book which now lies before me. As a text-book for High School and College classes, Newcomer's *American Literature* is one of the best that has been published. It is comprehensively succinct in treatment, logical and orderly in arrangement, careful and scholarly without being tedious in the narration of facts, sound and entertaining in its critical judgments, and, above all, is written in a racy, original, charming style.

It will not have escaped the attention of any one who has read the Introduction to Newcomer's *Selections from Landor*¹ that the author is the master of an unusually attractive English style. And in this day of rapid and rash text-book making, a man with a good style is not to be passed by with indifference. The man who writes well can make very *uninteresting* subjects fresh and attractive, while the man with no style is always *tiresome*. But the man who combines both style and scholarship is a boon to humanity.

¹ *English Readings*. Holt & Company, 1899.

Newcomer's critical estimates of several of the great American writers, for example, Poe and Hawthorne, are among the most finished and most inspiring literary essays that have been written on these men. His book is, however, not a collection of essays about the famous names in American or New England literature, such as those of Brander Matthews and William Cranston Lawton. It is a careful, methodical treatment of English literature in America from its beginning to the present day. The smallest poet who has contributed anything of value to our literature receives due notice and characterization as well as the greatest. The poets are not given undue prominence over the prose writers, and *vice versa*. The interest is remarkably well kept up for a book of such size and character. The author very correctly avoids the pitfalls of some recent writers on American literature who have unduly emphasized the importance of such insignificant writers as Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards. He likewise does ample justice to certain other names, like those of Franklin and Brockden Brown, whose qualities as men of letters are frequently either treated with scanty acknowledgment, or are entirely neglected.

Newcomer arranges the materials of the first few chapters of the book in such a manner that the student easily grasps the importance of the earliest attempts in various kinds of literature—history, theology, poetry, and fiction. Cavalier and Puritan, Quaker and Catholic—all receive attention in so far as they were concerned with the beginnings of American literature. Franklin's *Poor Richard* and his *Autobiography* are justly estimated, but I was a little disappointed to discover that the richest vein of Franklin's character in its influence upon American literary development namely, the humorous, has been entirely overlooked by Newcomer. Brander Matthews says, in his interesting essay on Franklin:¹ 'Humor, indeed, he had so abundantly that it was almost a failing. Like Abraham Lincoln another typical American, he never shrank from a jest.' Even in the throes of death the great philosopher was cheerful and humorous. In writing to a friend about death, he says: 'I have seen a good deal of this world, and I feel a growing curiosity to be acquainted with some other.' Of his extreme old age and his sufferings he once said: 'I seem to have intruded myself into the company of posterity, when I ought to have been abed and asleep;' and, 'when I consider how many more terrible maladies the human

¹ *Introduction to American Literature*. New York, 1896, p. 36.

body is liable to, I think myself well off that I have only three incurable ones: the gout, the stone, and old age.¹

It is really remarkably that the writers of short histories of American literature continue to neglect this important element of all Franklin's writings. Even Barrett Wendell in his more extensive *Literary History of America* shows little appreciation of the humorous side of Franklin's character and work. In fact, the chapter on Benjamin Franklin is the most unappreciative and incomplete in Wendell's book. The so-called 'histories of American humor' are likewise deficient in that their authors have failed to see in Benjamin Franklin the first great American humorist. Franklin, the humorist, has been portrayed, however, in a most brilliant and lively manner by the late Paul Leicester Ford in his *Many-Sided Franklin*. The rich and sparkling humor for which American literature has long been famous virtually made its advent with the early writings of Benjamin Franklin, and it may be traced in unbroken line from him through the writings of the graceful Irving, and those of Holmes and Lowell, down to Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and others of our own day.

It is in the second part of the book, which Newcomer entitles 'The Creative Impulse,' and which covers the years from 1800 to 1860, that we find the author's best work. It is in the chapters of this part that all the really noteworthy American writers are passed in careful, critical review, and it is here that the strong and the weak points in their several contributions to literature are brought out in a truly attractive and artistic manner.

Nothing could be much finer than Newcomer's discussion of Irving; and how admirably he characterizes Cooper and his work! And yet he appreciates the defects of Cooper's writings and the weakness of his character, which he sets forth clearly, but not unjustly. He holds that in spite of Cooper's defects 'as a literary artist,' they are not of sufficient importance to 'condemn him utterly.'

It would be difficult to find a better characterization of Poe's work as poet and writer of tales than that given by Newcomer. He is neither a blind eulogist, nor a half-hearted apologist, nor a scornful defamer of Poe's character and writings. He seems to have grasped the salient features of the good as well as of the bad in Poe, and he places them before the reader in an interesting

¹ Cf. Matthews, p. 33.

manner, with the graces of style, the artist's sympathy, and the confidence of the true critic.

After Poe, Newcomer's best work as a literary critic and appreciative biographer is to be found in his study of Hawthorne. He writes of Hawthorne as an apparent admirer of his work, and his own enthusiasm, and power of characterization, and delicate discrimination carry the reader with him. For here, as also in the case of Poe, he cannot be charged with indiscriminate, fulsome praise. He sees the good in Hawthorne's writings, and points it out with all the power of deep admiration. He is, on the other hand, not oblivious to the defects of the great romancer's work, and he does not hesitate to hold them up before the student—but always with a touch of sympathy.

Hawthorne, like Poe, occupies a unique place in the history of American literature; and there is a certain similarity between the two men in their 'attitude toward romance,' as well as an intimate kinship in other respects. 'Poe was fully Hawthorne's equal in art,' but he did not import enough 'of the human element into his eerie fancies.' Hawthorne 'is careful not to lose the way' in 'the excursion of his fancy,' and for this reason he 'never loses even the most prosaic reader's confidence.' Herein lies 'his immense advantage over Poe.'

What Newcomer says in the two or three pages devoted to Harriet Beecher Stowe and her work seems to me to be about the sanest, most impartial criticism of this famous woman and her once popular book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He neither unduly lauds nor unjustly belittles the literary importance of the work, and he is possibly correct in the assertion that 'Mrs. Stowe aimed to set forth life as it really was'—which is different from saying she describes conditions which were typical of the South before the war. Such a statement (which, by the way, one sometimes hears from educated men and women in the Northern part of the country) would not receive the assent of a large body of intelligent men and women who are probably more capable of passing judgment on the question than any critic or historian who has not spent some years of his life in the South. Whatever opinion one may hold of the book as a piece of literary workmanship, and of its influence upon the anti-slavery movement, one who knows the South and its sentiment, as well as the North, cannot but lament the persistent effort that is made in many cities north of 'Mason and Dixon's line' to keep the harrowing scenes of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* constantly before the minds

of the immature boys and girls of our schools. There is, it seems to me, no one thing at the present day that is so powerful an agent in keeping alive an erroneous conception of the Southern people on the part of the North, as well as in fostering the spirit of sectionalism, as the story of Uncle Tom. Instead of being made required reading in High School courses, as is the case in a number of cities, the book should be relegated to the highest shelves of our libraries, there to lie undisturbed until our boys and girls have become men and woman of judgment and discernment.

In the chapter on 'The Transcendental Movement,' the author lays especial stress upon the part which Emerson, Thoreau, and the Brook Farm Society played in the intellectual and religious life of New England. The work of New England orators like Webster, and that of the great historians, Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman, is concisely, but sufficiently described.

Space will not permit me to give an extended account of Newcomer's discussion of the great New England poets. Suffice it to say that he is as felicitous in his critical estimate of Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes, and Lowell, as in that of Poe and Hawthorne. The characteristic elements in the productions of these writers are placed before the student with sound judgment and in good style. Praise is usually given where it is due, and blame is never withheld where it is clearly deserved. Lowell's wit, scholarship, and critical ability are brought out distinctly, while the evident defects of his poetry and prose alike are sufficiently stressed. The touching pathos of Holmes' verse and the rich humor of 'The Breakfast Table Series' are not passed over, and the famous Autocrat's romances are briefly characterized. On such popular, not to say, hackneyed, subjects as these: the poetry of Longfellow, the critical powers of Lowell, the humor of Holmes, it is of course difficult to say anything new and original. We hardly expect it in such a book. But Newcomer's estimates are always entertaining, and not seldom inspiring.

More space is devoted to Walt Whitman and his poetical mission than we are accustomed to find in books of similar aims and compass. Although he defies classification, and although 'the public has not yet made up its mind whether he was a poet or a prose writer, a philosopher or an ignoramus, a genius or a charlatan,' Whitman was nevertheless too strong and vigorous a personality to omit from any complete account of American literary development. In spite of all eccentricities of character and irregularities

of composition, Whitman has had not a few ardent admirers from the time when *Leaves of Grass* first made its appearance. Most readers of English poetry will, like Newcomer, find nuggets of refined gold in the midst of much dross, but it is not easy to understand the extreme praise that Whitman's poetry has from time to time received. When we are informed by critics like Edmund Gosse that Whitman is the most typical of American poets, we are inclined to think that Mr. Gosse's conceptions of American life were derived from Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* or Bret Harte's *Luck of Roaring Camp*.

Newcomer's treatment of the later minor writers of American literature is more complete than that of other monograph histories with which I am acquainted. Southern poets like Hayne, Timrod, and Lanier receive brief but adequate notice, and a short chapter is devoted to the 'Prose and Poetry of the West,' in which especial attention is given to Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Joaquin Miller, E. R. Sill, and Helen Hunt Jackson. In the chapter on 'Poetry and Criticism in the East' the author brings his history up to date. Aldrich, Howells, Stedman, Emily Dickinson, John Burroughs, and others are briefly and clearly characterized.

It might be objected that several comparatively important writers of the later period who are barely mentioned, or not noticed at all, really deserve consideration in such a resume. But teachers of American literature will be thankful that so much has been included that is not usually found in books of a similar character, and which is nevertheless very valuable for a teacher's handbook.

The appendices contain copious lists of late and contemporary writers from all parts of the United States and Canada, a 'Chronological Outline,' 'Preferences,' 'Suggestions for Reading and Study,' and an 'Index.'

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The Origins and Sources of the Court of Love. William Allan Neilson. Boston, 1899. (*Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* VI.) Pp. 284.

The title of Dr. Neilson's book hardly indicates the profusion of matter which it presents. A sentence from the preface will show its real scope. 'The investigation was begun as an inquiry into the